

“The Chosen”

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You matter. You belong. You fit.

Ephesians 1:1-14

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An unbeliever recommends faith

An editorial in Tuesday's *Charlotte Observer* carried the headline, "Churches, Religion losing followers around the world." Andres Oppenheimer of the *Miami Herald* began, "Contrary to what some of us expected, the COVID-19 pandemic has not brought about a religious revival." That remains to be seen. Spiritual awakenings happen at moments when alternatives run their course and fail. In Scripture and in the book of Judges, when people "do what is right in their own eyes" (Judges 21) for a generation or two or longer, they eventually realize they need God's ways again.

I thought Oppenheimer's opinion piece was most insightful, especially coming from someone who says he's not religious. He says the decline of religion "has a huge downside." We live in a "post-truth world," and if people don't look to their church to teach values and faith, they will look somewhere else. He goes on to connect this to political extremism, but his point can be much broader.

Toward the end of his opinion piece, Oppenheimer quotes Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution: "Human beings by their very nature are searching for meaning, belonging, coherent structure." That one line is a perfect introduction to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

This letter is different from any of Paul's letters. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it "the divinest composition of man." That gets me excited to preach on it. The letter opens with three primary messages. You matter. You belong. You fit.

You matter

The first universal human longing is for meaning. Most of life is lived going through repetitive motions. That's true no matter what your family or work look like. And we are OK with it most of the time until a life is cut short or life falls apart. Then we want to know what it's all about and whether we have any significance.

To start this letter, "I'm an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (1) is either one of the most arrogant statements ever written, or it's cause to sit up and take notice. Paul is saying that the Creator of the universe has personally appointed him as an envoy, has sent him to convey Jesus Christ in every possible way. He can't not actively keep at it because God has appointed him. He is "the chosen."

Let's think about Paul's story. If you have been tracking our Sundays here at Corinth since Christmas – or even if you were here last Sunday – there's a great gap between the end of Matthew's gospel and the work of the Apostle Paul that needs to be named and explained. It's not only the time gap of thirty years. Something else is odd.

To be sure, the gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus instructing the Eleven remaining disciples (Judas had committed suicide) to "make disciples of all nations." But Paul wasn't one of those Eleven.

Those Eleven disciples remained in Jerusalem for the most part. They had declared that the long-anticipated Messiah of Israel had come in the person of Jesus. He had been crucified precisely to terminate his threat to the religious system that existed there. But his followers witnessed to seeing him alive again. They believed the Messianic age had dawned, not with a political uprising but with a message of forgiveness and reconciliation.

One of those who was determined to eradicate the Jesus Way was Saul of Tarsus. Nobody was more passionate about studying and living out a complete commitment to the Jewish law. Nobody was better at it. Nobody was more determined to crush the lies of those who declared he was alive. That is, until he himself was blinded by a light on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus, Syria, intending to find and kill members of this false sect. He had been so vocal and so active in persecuting Christians that when he told his story of conversion, many Christians rejected him. Saul was sidelined for a decade or more in obscurity.

Then a community of believers in Antioch, Syria, was in need of a leader. An encourager by the name of Barnabas went and found Saul and brought him to that community, where he pastored the first group of Jesus followers to be called "Christians." Before long, that group decided Barnabas and Saul should be their first emissaries to widen the circle of knowledge about this Jesus. There's hardly a story more surprising in the Bible than Saul, the former Pharisee and persecutor becoming

the most ardent advocate of Jesus Christ. What if you were to hear that Bernie Sanders is now a Republican, or Ted Cruz a Democrat? Yes, Paul's story is like that.

When he writes this letter, Paul has been at this for more than a decade, traveling in ever-widening circles across Asia Minor and southeastern Europe, establishing Christian community after another. He knows he is chosen. But he wants his readers to know he's not alone.

Watch how he expresses this in verses 3-5. "He chose us" (not just me). "He predestined us" (not just me). "He adopted us" (not just me). All of these ideas answer the human longing for meaning. He's telling his readers, "You matter!"

I'm well aware that readers of the Bible get hung up on the word "predestined." Some of you are troubled by it and want me to explain it away. Others are defensive of it and want me tell those ignorant people who are troubled by it to get over it. I don't intend to satisfy either group. Paul is not using the word to incite a theological debate. He is using a strong word to impress vividly on his readers that they matter to the same God who chose him and sent him as an envoy for Jesus Christ.

Forty-five years ago this spring I was six months into a dating relationship with a stunning blonde who loved Jesus so much. Now all these years later, having raised three children and having worked together professionally for most of those years, I'm still amazed that she chose me! She still loves me, still affirms me, still wants to be with me, still challenges me, is still my best friend. She chose me!

That's the response Paul wants from his readers. We are "the Chosen." We do matter.

You belong

Chosen for what? Chosen to belong. That's a second area of human craving. It's not enough to know we matter. We crave connection.

Paul says he's writing "To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" (1). Some of you probably know there's some debate around the words "in Ephesus." Early copies of this letter circulated with and without that specific destination. A lot of ink is spent on the issue, but the most common conclusion is "both-and." The letter was probably intended for a group of churches on the western coast of what we call Turkey, and one of them was Ephesus.

There are so many interesting things to be said about Ephesus. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was built there. Imagine something comparable to the Taj Mahal. Biltmore Estate times a hundred. For its combination of architecture and religion think Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem or The Vatican in Rome. 127 60-foot marble pillars surrounded a statue of the goddess Artemis in Ephesus. The structure

was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens. In their limited world view, the Ephesians said their goddess was worshiped by “all Asia and the world” (Acts 19:27).

What’s important to this letter is that Paul had been there on one of his journeys. He had preached Jesus for three years – longer than he stayed anywhere else, as best we can, after he started his missionary journeys. He was so successful in preaching Christ that the commercial religious establishment – think tourist shops where tradespeople made boatloads of money selling small replicas of Artemis – started a riot. They gathered the city’s residents in the theater and started a grand chant: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” This assembled mob threatened not only Paul and other Christians but the Jews as well – who, though they didn’t worship Artemis – were also opponents of pagan idolatry. Everyone turned against Paul except those who believed his message. Roman authorities were going to hold Paul responsible for the whole mess. And Christians (Jew or Gentile) were to be treated as outsiders, as threats.

This is behind Paul’s language not only of adoption but of “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us” (7-8). Later in the passage, Paul makes clear that his readers are personally part of this family. “You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (13). The phrase “in Christ” is key in this passage and in Ephesians and in all of Paul’s writings. We’ll come back to it in our study, but it’s part of this belonging.

As he writes this letter, he wants his readers to claim that same sense of meaning from that same God. Some say this is an impersonal letter. While it’s true that Paul doesn’t include many names, I completely disagree that this is impersonal. There are about 25 personal pronouns in the first fourteen verses. Most of them are first person plural – “we,” “us,” and “our.” What Paul is doing is including his readers in the wonder of what God has done for him. It’s not about “me,” he says. It’s about “us!”

Now, years later, Paul was writing back to this Christian community that had stabilized and thrived. He wanted to remind them that they were still part of a larger family, a community of “us.” They belonged.

There’s another “family” aspect of this passage that is easy to overlook. It’s part of the richness of Christian understanding that was presented in seed form in last week’s “Great Commission” when Jesus said to baptize “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19-20).

There’s a reason we crave belonging. We are created in God’s image to belong. It’s wired into our nature to connect. The God who created us in his image exists eternally in what we call a family. This is what he has invited us into. We have been included in this family that began before there was a you or a me or an us. The family we experience is not a perfect one, like his, but even in its imperfection, it both satisfies that inner craving and creates a longing to join him in his forever family.

You need to belong, and you do.

You fit

We want “coherent structure.” We’re made to need it. If we don’t have it, we try to create it. You don’t need to create it. There is a plan. It’s God’s plan. And you fit. It’s one thing to believe I matter and I belong, but quite another to believe that what I belong to matters. Paul unveils a greater scheme as he writes.

Mystery – This is not “secrecy” but “revelation” only God can make plain. God is doing something that only he can reveal because only he knows the end of the story. It’s fascinating to ponder that these are people without what we call the Old Testament or the Gospels. Even if they are literate, they mostly know the stories they have heard. They don’t engage in “chronological Bible reading” over a year’s time. What’s more, Paul rarely retells those stories. There must have been some level of “mystery” among those who heard bits and pieces.

Unity – A key part of what God is doing is unity – bringing all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. This is what Jesus was saying in Matthew 28 – “All authority has been given to me.” It is God’s purpose in Christ to reverse the second law of thermodynamics, to reverse entropy (disintegration, disorder). Don’t try to make this verse about universalism – that “everyone’s in.” Paul will deal with that theme more as we go ahead. Grasp that separation and division are not what he wants.

Purpose – We don’t live in a chaotic world that is hurling into oblivion. God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”

Guarantee – Sometimes it doesn’t feel like that. Sometimes it seems the world is spinning out of control and sometimes it seems my life is going nowhere or backwards. Paul has a personal response. A Person who is God’s response. This is where Paul includes faith. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal. He’ll unpack “believed” later on, but he doesn’t want the focus on you at this point. He wants all the attention on what God has done for you.

The “seal” is probably a reference to the physical imprint, like a brand on a first century slave. Ours is an “inner tattoo” – the Holy Spirit guiding and comforting and assuring us that we matter, that we belong, and that we fit. Not only now, but there is an “inheritance,” a “redemption” to come. We are God’s possession.

This closing section is about faith in what we can’t see. There’s a larger plan and purpose and mystery and unity that we can’t touch and sometimes can’t explain. What’s going on in your life and mine is bigger than we are, grander than we can imagine. If you’re trying to find yourself in it, Paul has five and a half more chapters.

This is why Paul's greeting is not a throwaway section to skip over. In his greeting he had conveyed both grace and peace (2). They will find both grace and peace as they find themselves to be part of a plan so big it shatters their usual categories.

When you feel you're not worthy, Paul wants you to remember grace. When you feel out of control, Paul wants you to choose peace. Both come from your connection to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. You find grace and peace when you know you fit.

To the praise of his glory

No English translation does proper justice to the effusive, elated, excited way in which Paul writes these words. Verses 3-14 are all one long, run-on sentence in the Greek. Paul's like a kid who's just been told, "We're going to Disney World!"

I took *The Message* paraphrase and revised the punctuation to express Paul's breathless sense of wonder.

How blessed is God, the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, who takes us to the high places of blessing in him and had us in mind long before he laid down earth's foundations, having settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love, and having decided long, long ago to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ, taking such pleasure in planning this, wanting us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son, pouring out the blood of the Messiah on the altar of the Cross to make us a free people, free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds, and not just barely but freely, providing for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making, having set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth, allowing us in Christ to find out who we are and what we are living for, setting his eye on us long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, having designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone, bringing you home free in Christ, once you heard the truth and believed this Message of your salvation, signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit, the signet from God who is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life.

Paul is a coach at the beginning of the season. There's a sense in which every team is a gathering of people looking for meaning, belonging, and coherent structure.

Now Paul addresses these Ephesians and says, "You'll find what you're looking for right here. I'll give you the details as we go along, but let's start with this: You matter, you belong, you fit. Amen.